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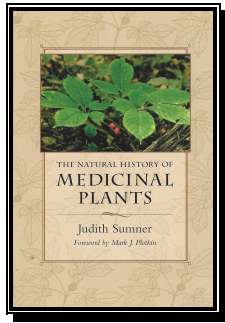
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The Natural History of Medicinal Plants

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By Judith Sumner
Timber Press, Inc (2000)

Although scientists have estimated that over 250,000 species of angiosperms exist on earth, most of these plants have yet to be explored for their medicinal properties. In general, humans have been using many species of plants medicinally for centuries. Through personal experience and knowledge passed down for generations, indigenous people have learned which species of plants may help alleviate certain ailments such as toothaches, induce labor, or cure malaria.

In recent years, there has been an explosion of interest regarding plants and their medicinal value. In 1994, the Dietary Health and Education Act was passed which allowed any substance which can be found naturally to be sold as a "dietary supplement" regardless of its concentration or potential hazards. Since then, interest in medicinal plants has increased dramatically in the United States.

Unfortunately, many laypeople and physicians are unaware of the toxic potential of many plant species and therefore, they may be jeopardizing their health instead of promoting it. Therefore, in the book, *The Natural History of Medicinal Plants*, Judith Sumner attempts to provide an accurate source of information regarding botanical medicines and their uses.

Throughout the book, Sumner describes a multitude of plants and gives a brief background history of many important plant species. Although she mentions several species multiple times throughout her writing, Sumner fails to provide a detailed description of many medicinal plants which would be of interest to current health care providers and their patients.

In general, the format of the book is rather unsystematic, her topics of interest are random and overall, the chapters do not appear to be directly connected. Although the majority of the information introduced was quite interesting, the manner in which she presented it was unorganized, therefore depreciating the importance of the information.

Sumner's book highlights many plant species which have proved useful in the past as well as other medicinal plants which may be useful in future research. In this case, Sumner applies past knowledge of certain botanical medicines to present topics of interest. Not only does she thoroughly explain some medicines derived from plants which are a part of everyday life, but she also focuses on potential drugs which may be developed from plants in the future. Although these aspects were the most interesting and informative topics in the book, only a few chapters were dedicated to these issues. Instead of presenting information concerning plant medicines which are currently used, Sumner goes into great detail regarding the plant defenses certain species have developed in response to competitors, predators, and other biological interferences.

Overall, Judith Sumner provides a brief description of many wild and cultivated plants that have been important for human life for many centuries. On the other hand, she fails to fulfill her goal of providing an accurate background for people who are currently interested in botanical medicine. Although there is no doubt that *The Natural History of Medicinal Plants* offers knowledge of the history of botanical medicines and the impact many species have had on human life, it does not thoroughly inform readers about the current medicinal plants most frequently used.

* This paper was written for BIO384 Plant Biology, taught by Dr. Lynn Westley and Raymond Wiggers.